# Quentin Tarantino's Death Proof (2007): Subverting Gender through Genre or Vice Versa?

David Roche

María del Mar Azcona and Celestino Deleyto

# Generic attractions: New essays on film genre criticism

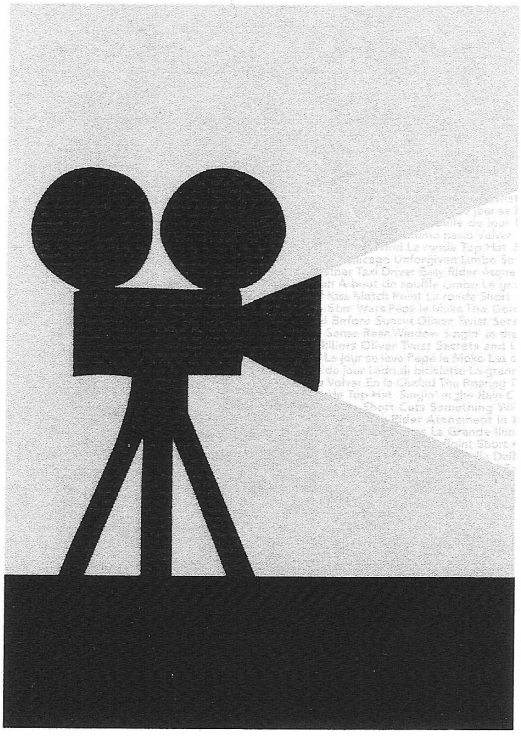

TABLE OF CONTENTS

## II. Genres and History

**III. Genres And *Auteurs***



**IV. Genres in Action**

# QUENTIN TARANTINO'S DEATH PROOF (2007): SUBVERTING GENRE THROUGH GENDER OR VICE VERSA?

*David Roche*
*(for George-Claude)*

## THE PLOT: GIRLS IN A GUYS' MOVIE

Tarantino's sixth film is about a serial killer, Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell), who murders girls with his death proof stuntcar. The film is divided into two parts which tell similar stories of the killer stalking girls; only in the first he succeeds in murdering five, while in the second three girls end up slaying him. *Death Proof* mixes three genres which are characteristically 'male' as far as the characters and/or the majority audience are concerned: the buddy movie, the car movie and the slasher. Buddy movies like Tarantino's own *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) are films with guys for guys with no or few secondary female characters. Likewise for the car movies mentioned in *Death Proof*—*Vanishing Point* (Richard C. Safarian, 1971), *Gone in 60 Seconds* (H. B. Halicki, 1974), *Dirty Mary Crazy Larry* (John Hough, 1974). Even if the female character is important enough to have her name in the latter title, she remains a girl in a man's world. More importantly, "most girls wouldn't know" these films, as Kim (Tracie Thoms) points out. Carol Clover notes that the "majority viewer" (1992: 7) and "the slasher film's implied audience" are "[y]oung males" (1992: 23). Diegetically speaking, however, the slasher is not overtly male. If the killer is "usually—but not necessarily—male" (Creed 1993: 124), the victims can be both male and female, although Clover argues that "even in films in which males and females are killed in roughly even numbers, the lingering images are inevitably female. The death of a male is always swift [and is] more likely to be viewed from a distance" (1992: 35). For Barbara Creed, the slasher 'primarily represent[s] woman in the *twin* roles of castrated and castrator, and it is the latter image which dominates the ending in almost all of these films' (1993: 127). These feminist critics do not just underline the horror genre's phallocentrism, but seem to imply that its 'femaleness' is, paradoxically, what makes it 'male'. Woman is used "as a kind of feint, a front through which the boy can simultaneously experience forbidden desires and

disavow them on grounds that the visible actor is, after all, a girl" (Clover 1992: 18).

*Death Proof*'s two-part structure is essential in understanding how the film interweaves these genres. The only narrative link is that the two parts deal with the same killer hunting down '[his] girlfriends'. It is a clear instance of repetition with difference. If the two parts take up roughly the same amount of time—52 minutes—the symmetry is often flawed or inverted. The first part takes place mainly at night and indoors, the second during the day and mainly outdoors. The first shows a girls' night-out, the second its aftermath. Both start with three girls, but in the first part, Lanna Frank (Monica Staggs), who joins the group later on at the Texas Chili Parlor, and Pam (Rose McGowan), a girl Mike (Kurt Russell) gives a ride to, become Mike's unplanned fourth and fifth victims, while in the second, Zoe (Zoe Bell) arrives and eventually replaces Lee (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). In other words, the impression of *déjà vu* at the beginning of the second part almost gives the impression that the first group of girls has resuscitated, although the two stuntgirls, Kim and Zoe, are also Stuntman Mike's doubles.

*Death Proof* is a buddy movie with girls, or more exactly, the film's two parts start out like one, which is typical of the slasher, as Tarantino points out in the DVD extra 'Reservoir Girls'. I use buddy movie rather than teen flick because the emphasis is on the girls hanging out with '[their] girls', talking about girl topics, which are similar to male topics in buddy films. Similar tracking shots are used in the diner scene as in the opening scene of *Reservoir Dogs*—the DVD extra dealing with the female cast is called 'Reservoir Girls'. Not including the scenes where Mike is alone, the only lengthy scenes with any guys occur at the Texas Chili Parlor, and the only guys-only scene is, appropriately, when Dov (Eli Roth) and Omar (Michael Bacall) go over their strategy to get invited to the girls-only weekend at lake LBJ. As Eli Roth jokes in the DVD extra 'The Guys of *Death Proof*', "[t]he girls just castrate us and neuter us at every turn, and we're essentially their bitches".

*Death Proof* is a car movie with girls, but this is truly the case only in the second part of the film. In the first, the girls use Shanna's small red Honda to get around, which is not exactly the 'Detroit American muscle car' the genre requires. The car movie is thus exclusively associated with Stuntman Mike who mentions the classics. In the second part, however, the genre is also associated with Kim and Zoe who are fans of the same movies; the first drives the *Gone in 60 Seconds* Mustang, while the second dreams of driving the *Vanishing Point* Challenger.

*Death Proof* is a slasher with a male serial killer and lots of girls. Clover says the slasher is "pretechnological" insomuch as the weapons are "personal extensions of the body" (1992: 32), but as Sheriff McGraw

(Michael Parks) underlines, Mike "used a car not a hatchet, but they dead just the same". Mike's car is clearly an extension of his body. The film refers to many classics of the genre. Mike has the same first name as the killer in John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), while the girls' going to a lake recalls the *Friday the 13th* series. The opening credits designate the killer as the star of the show, the girls as interchangeable victims, an impression reinforced by the film's two-part structure. In this respect, *Death Proof* represents the epitome of the slasher, as well as the 'ideal' slasher for guys, the male killer posing no threat to the male characters. The film's structure also plays on the tradition of slasher sequels, where the serial killer returns to commit more crimes with increasing superhuman power, only the second part puts an end to the series without the killer's succeeding in increasing his death count and shows the killer as a "cowardly lion", as Tarantino says in the DVD extra 'Kurt Russell as Stuntman Mike'.

*Death Proof* also plays on a derivative of the slasher, the rape-revenge genre, the paradigm being *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) where a woman tortures and kills the four men who raped her. However, the victims do not avenge themselves but get avenged by their doubles in the second part of the film. The first part corresponds, then, to rape/murder, the second to rape/revenge. Indeed, Sheriff McGraw sees Mike's murdering the girls with his car as "a sex thing", which is confirmed later on when the maniac rams into the girls' car and insults them: "You wanna get hot? Suck on this for a while, bitch!" In other words, if the first part of *Death Proof* represents the 'ideal' slasher, the second confirms Clover's analysis that "the rape-revenge film goes the slasher one better, for rape-revenge films not only have female heroes and male villains, they repeatedly and explicitly articulate feminist politics" (1992: 151).

By having all the girls die almost at the same time in the first part of the film, and all the girls live in the second, *Death Proof* quite intentionally plays with the figure of the 'final girl' as defined by Clover. Tarantino actually describes Arlene (Vanessa Ferlito) as "the final girl" in his screenplay (2007: 15), in a scene which recalls the scene where Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) notices Michael Myers's (Tony Moran) car outside her school in *Halloween*. Clover's argument that the final girl "deliver[s] herself into the adult world" (1992: 49) is structurally displaced onto the fact that the girls in the first part are less mature than those in the second; Erich Kuersten says the former belong to a "college-like world", the latter to the "working world" (2008). Tarantino, then, clearly sees film genre as a set of codes that enable a director to play with the spectator's expectations because they 'evoke certain audience expectations' (Grant 1977: 1). The spectator is meant to recognise Arlene as the "boyish" girl (Clover 1992: 40) who registers "small signs of danger that her friends ignore" (39), and

expects her to survive. Tarantino's approach to genre also confirms Thomas Sobchack's statement that "[g]enre films are made in imitation not of life but of other films" (1977: 41). In the end, Tarantino's attitude toward genre is that of the 'romantic' auteur director who, as Frank D. McConnell says, "rearranges and decomposes—the 'rules' of the form he has selected" (1977: 10). I would suggest that Tarantino also sees himself as a film critic, like his mentor, Godard.

The second part of the film plays on the idea that "[i]t lies in the nature of revenge or self-defense stories (horror makes the point over and over) that the avenger or self-defender will become as directly or indirectly violent as her assailant, and these films are in some measure *about* that transformation" (Clover 1992: 123). Indeed, instead of reporting Mike, Abernathy (Rosario Dawson), Kim and Zoe decide to pursue and kill him. Not only are they "not punished" and "shown to be justified in their actions" (Creed 1993: 123), as with most other films in this subgenre, but the three girls take as much pleasure in doing so as in playing Ship's Mast, recalling the three Amazons from Russ Meyer's *Faster Pussycat, Kill, Kill* (1965) who gratuitiously beat a man to death after racing him. What is interesting about the end of *Death Proof* is that, unlike the "intelligent, resourceful and usually not sexually active" final girl (Creed 1993: 124), Kim, Zoe and Abernathy use their physical strength, stereotypically gendered 'masculine', to outdo the killer, punching and kicking him to death. Only the film rejects the idea that their talents are exclusively masculine *per se* by having Abernathy give the *coup de grâce* to Mike by delivering a split-leg kick to the head (fig. 1): the same physical talent thus enables her to vanquish the killer, dance the French cancan with the more 'feminine' Lee who is also shown dancing ballet, and presumably work in *Three Kicks to the Head Part III*—a reference to Salik Silverstein's *Kick in the Head* (2002), which has no sequels. Abernathy is, then, the site of the very "transformation" described by Clover. The second part of the film is thus a rape-revenge film and not a slasher, for not only do all the girls survive, but they put a stop to the killer, which is not the case of the final girls who sometimes get killed in later episodes, e.g. Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) in *Halloween: Resurrection* (Rick Rosenthal, 2002).

Having shown that the film's narrative structure playfully relates gender to genre, I want to look at the way they interact at other levels which I will very artificially relate to various stages in the filmmaking process. I will argue that *Death Proof* shows how generic codes are often gendered and calls into question not only these codes, but also the essentialist idea that there are 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics, speech patterns, genres and, more generally, norms. The questions I want to raise are: Does gender merely serve to subvert generic codes? Can the subversion of genre also participate in a form of 'gender trouble', the film's generic hybridity offering, possibly, a

gendered hybridity? This study will also enable me to further outline Tarantino's vision of genre as an auteur director who believes he masters these codes.

## DIALOGUE: GIRLS TALKING LIKE GUYS

Many instances of girls talking like guys are spoken by the 'gearheads', Zoe and Kim, and are thus directly related to the car movie. When Zoe tells the others that she would like to drive the *Vanishing Point* Challenger, she concludes: "If I can get this guy to let me drive it without buying it, I will blow the doors off that bitch!" Like any guy, she feminises the car, but a previous line reveals she does so not as a girl, but as a man *and* a girl: "I want to drive a Dodge Challenger, fuck me swinging, balls out!" If "fuck me swinging" expresses amazement and "balls out"[1] the idea of driving fast, taken literally, the former places Zoe in a female position, the latter in a male position. The two are then conflated when, playing Ship's Mast, Zoe rides spread-eagled on the hood of the car, undermining the game's name which phallicizes the player's body. Another instance of a girl talking like a guy is when Kim pursues Mike. Like the killer, she describes ramming into his car as a form of violation, but if she takes on the male position, she puts Mike in both male and female positions: "Oh, don't like it up the ass, do ya, you redneck lunatic bastard! Oh yeah, bitch, I'm gonna bust a nut up in this bitch right now! I'm the horniest motherfucker on the road!"

If Zoe's use of idioms appears spontaneous, it is not clear whether Kim is intentionally mimicking male discourse. But what *Death Proof* does indicate is that, in genre films, the characters' positions are symbolically fixed in terms of gender—the killer, the rapist and the driver are male, the victim and the car are female—confirming Clover's argument that "gender inheres in the function itself" (1992: 12). This means that generic codes can also function as "regulatory norms of 'sex' [that] work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (Butler 1993: 2). But it also means that if these gender positions are fixed, they are so symbolically and discursively, not biologically. If a buddy film, a car movie or a slasher can have girls in the male parts, it is because generic codes are discursive (Altman 1999: 209). It is clear, then, that in *Death Proof* gender is a question of genre. The film is subversive insomuch as it acknowledges these generic codes all the while revealing their artificial quality, notably with these 'girls' who reveal the 'performativity' of gendered generic norms: they are 'girls' because they have been placed in that position as early as the opening credits, but at times they also occupy the position of 'guys'.

*Death Proof* also shows how contemporary American vernacular enables this blurring of gender lines when an individual says "you guys" to address two or more people regardless of their gender. In all five instances where a female character uses the idiom, she does so to distinguish between herself and the other members of the group: Arlene when trying to break up a 'fight' between Julia (Sydney Tamiia Poitier) and Shanna (Jordan Ladd), Abernathy when she acknowledges that her friends think Cecil is 'likeable' even if he cheated on her, Zoe when she wants Lee and Abernathy to stay with Jasper (Jonathan Loughran) as 'collateral', and Abernathy twice when she feels excluded from the 'posse' Kim, Zoe and herself are supposed to form. In each instance, the speaker uses "you guys" to extract herself from the group she heretofore belonged to. So although discrimination does not operate along gender lines here, it is nevertheless expressed thanks to an idiom that conveys the idea of gender difference. Moreover, each instance is related to the idea of friendship, thus linking this verbal 'gender trouble' to the generic 'gender trouble' of a buddy movie with girls.

One male character, Nate (Omar Doom), uses the phrase when talking to Arlene: "Look, I know you guys are going to lake LBJ and we can't come... I want to make out!' Ironically, he uses it to distinguish the girls from the guys who are excluded, confirming Eli Roth's statement that the latter are the girls" "bitches". Arlene's telling Nate to "stop with the whine" constitutes him as a "mum" in her eyes, like Abernathy in Zoe's. Again, exclusion is expressed in terms of gender, with the guys being the excluding group, the girls the excluded. Note that Mike, the older man, uses the word "ladies" when addressing Julia and Arlene, significantly right after the girls have decided not to invite the boys; in the screenplay, he even calls Julia "my fair lady" and kisses her hand (Tarantino 2007: 58). Mike's good manners symbolically reinforce gender and oedipal distinctions: he represents the man and the father as opposed to the boys. He is also a double of Shanna's father who has "a tendency to pop up" at the lakehouse to spy on the girls. Mike thus shares the slasher killer's ambivalence as a "puritanical" and "repressive father-figure" (Humphries 2002: 159-60). Ironically, he will be punished for not realising that his 'girlfriends' can also occupy the position of the killer and he that of the victim. In any case, this play on ordinary speech and generic codes supports the idea that the latter can be considered as a form of discourse that symbolically fixes gender positions and which can be manipulated as such.

## ACTING: WHAT GIRLS (THINK THEY) KNOW ABOUT GUYS

The male characters, although pretty much excluded from the narrative, are nevertheless very much present in the girls' conversations,

Fig.1: Abernathy delivering the coup de grâce


Fig.2: Opening credits 1: Arlene's feet

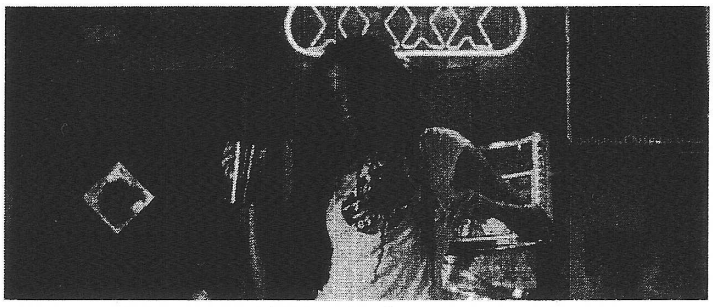

Fig.3: Jungle Julia dancing while Omar watches

Fig.4: Stuntman Mike grinning at the camera

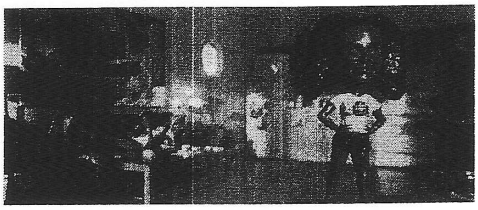

Fig.5: Opening credits 2:The Jungle Julia doll

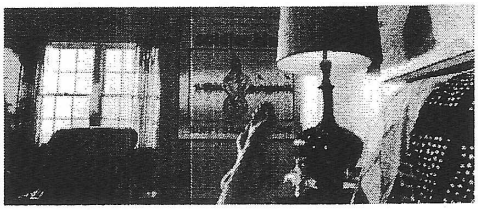

Fig.6: Opening credits 3: Jungle Julia's feet

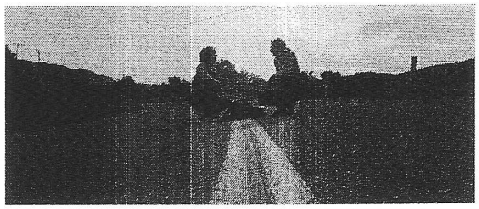

Fig.7: Kim and Zoe talking about Ship's Mast

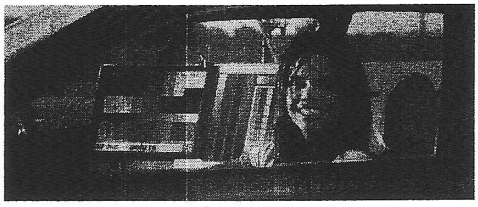

Fig.8: End Credits 1: Arlene grinning at the camera

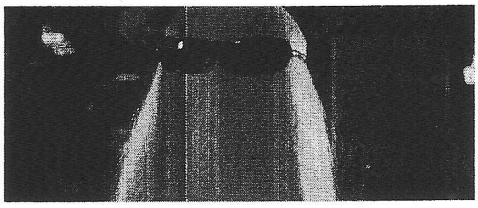

Fig.9: End Credits 2: Pam as Cousin Itt

like girls in a buddy film. The female characters believe they know how guys think and act on this knowledge; Arlene tells her friends she told Nate: "I already know what you're gonna say and the anwer is no". For the girls, it is an undeniable truth that guys are after girls for sex. Abernathy goes so far as to suggest that you can't have a relationship with a man *and* have sex with him: "The reason Cecil hasn't had a girlfriend in *six* years is because girls will *fuck* him. And if you fuck Cecil, you *don't* become one of his girlfriends. Not to say I *want* to be his girlfriend, but if I *did* want to be his gilfriend, if I fucked him, I wouldn't be his girlfriend. I'd be one of his regulars". Abernathy's syllogism demonstrates that she has not found a way out of the typical 'good girl'/'bad girl' dichotomy. By concluding that "men are *dogs*" after telling her friends how Cecil "fucked another woman on [her] birthday", she constructs him into a paradigm of male behavior. Her friends then give their opinion on how Abernarthy should deal with Cecil as if he were not an individual but just another man. Lee tells Abernathy: "But it is true, if you start shit out with *Cecil*, or you suddenly get dirty on *him*, it blows—*their* mind' (emphasis added). For Kim, Cecil's behavior is normal in that "[h]e's just actin' like a man", while Abernathy is acting inappropriately, 'like [she was] twelve-years old'. Kim may advocate an active role when she says a woman has got to "*claim*" her boyfriend, but her suggestion that Abernathy "give" Cecil a handjob evokes traditional notions of women giving and men taking. What Abernathy's friends invite her to do is play the game according to phallocentric rules.

Clearly, the girls act according to phallocentric representations of women rather than on their own desires. For in the end, it is not so much that the girls are not after the same thing—Julia's description of a guy "you *could* fuck" suggests just the opposite—only they know that not giving guys what they want is the best way to earn their 'respect'. Both Arlene and Lee explain that they sent their boyfriends home after the first date, not because they didn't *want* to spend the night with them, but because such behavior is clearly protocol. These two scenes suggest that all guys are the same and all girls act according to the same rules of conduct, thus reinforcing the narrative's symmetrical structure. *Death Proof* shows that girls today still behave according to male-authored discourses, only they are no longer written out in conduct books, but are vehicled by the invisible workings of power. In any case, giving or not giving a guy what he wants is a means of manipulating him. Shanna tells Julia that if she "get[s] those legs of [hers] round him", Christian Simonson's "house in the hills" will be all hers, which is echoed in the second part of the film by Kim's saying that the bitch who fucks Simonson will get his "big-ass mansion". Perversely, by playing according to phallocentric rules, the girls end up participating

in a form of prostitution, using their bodies and even their friends' to get what they want, e.g. Abernathy talks Jasper into letting them test drive his car by "insinuat[ing] that Lee's gonna blow him".

Confident in her knowledge of men, Julia the D.J. writes a scenario where her friend Arlene has to give a stranger a lapdance if he plays his part right: "I described you, and I said that if they spotted you while we were out, if they do something, you'd do something". Julia takes on the role of director, entrusting Marcy (Marcy Harriell) to 'act [the scene] out for [Arlene]'. Arlene first agrees to play the part to Marcy's parody of Julia's male fans who think "she's like the *coolest* lady in town", then disrupts Julia's scenario by acting like a girl who dislikes Julia: "Well that's what *she* always says, but in actual fact she doesn't really have a black girl's ass. She's got a *big* ass". Arlene's reaction underlines that Julia the D.J. is attempting to author her friend like she fashions her own body, according to phallocentric representations of men and women, so that her scenario, like the billboards which show her as a cheerleader or an Amazon, is a male fantasy come to life meant to please her audience. In the end, Julia is satisfied that Arlene's lapdance might "[get] Mike laid tonight".

The film's representation of men confirms the girls' vision of them. The only scene where Dov and Omar are without the girls has them plotting to get them drunk to increase their chances of having sex, but they ultimately fail—in the screenplay, Julia tells them: 'I ain't drinkin' no goddamn Jüger shot. Because I don't wanna fuck any of y'all, that's why' (Tarantino 2007: 41). But the film also shows how limited the girls' understanding of men is. For instance, Julia may be convinced that "Jesse Leadbetter is gonna be all over [Arlene]", but the latter never turns up, while the guy who ends up trying to win the lapdance is neither a "guy-[Arlene]-could fuck", nor a 'geek', but Stuntman Mike.

That Mike, the symbolic representative of the patriarchal law, plays the part in Julia's scenario ironically underlines its limitations. Mike, whom Pam won't "fuck" because "he's old enough to be [her] dad", recalls Freud's "tribal chief" who keeps all the women for himself (1965: 189-90). If the "boys" fail to get the girls, Mike literally takes their place: he gets a lapdance from Arlene, takes Pam home and ultimately 'does' all five girls. The scene where Dov and Omar discuss their Jüger-shot plan reveals their double: the serial killer in the background. The latter's intentions and methods are the same as theirs: vampiric Mike comes to bars for the 'women', which he explicitly associates with food and drink, waits for them to get drunk, and lies, e.g. he claims he does not drink alcohol when he has a bottle of whiskey in his glove compartment. But unlike Dov who calls Shanna 'Shauna', Mike knows Pam's name before starting a conversation with her and acts like he is not really interested in her, "offering [her] a lift,

*if* when [he's] ready to leave [she is] too', all the while licking his lips. In other words, Mike acts like a gentleman and masters the very rules of seduction the 'boys' fail to apply.

## SPECIAL EFFECTS: STUNTMEN AND TOMBOYS

As in many horror films of the 1970s (Humphries 2002: 14-15), the killer represents the return of the proletarian repressed, only Stuntman Mike embodies a specifically cinematographic version. It is significant that only Mike mentions *White Line Fever* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1975), a film about truckers rebelling against the corrupt bosses who exploit them. As Mike readily acknowledges, the stuntman works in the shadows. He is picked for a job because he "look[s] like" an actor. That none of the characters are familiar with the "shows or people" Mike worked on adds to the latter's insignificance. Not only does Pam mistake him for a cowboy, but, more significantly, stuntgirls Kim and Zoe never recognise him as their double and believe he is merely the stereotypical horror film "redneck lunatic bastard". In a time when C.G.I. is used in blockbuster films, the stuntman has no place, as Mike readily acknowledges to Pam.

Yet, the stuntgirls are proof that the stuntman tradition is still alive. Zoe's dream of driving the *Vanishing Point* Challenger metafictionally represents the stuntman's dream of incarnating the hero, as Kim unknowingly acknowledges when she names Kowalski, the main character in *Vanishing Point*. Tarantino's having Zoe Bell play her own part is clearly a means of putting the stuntman into the spotlight, as well as a homage to the original *Gone in 60 Seconds* directed by a stuntman who also played the leading role, while actress Tracie Thoms's playing a stuntgirl reverses the usual dichotomy. *Death Proof* suggests that a stuntman is equally an actor insomuch as he uses his body or extensions of his body to flesh out fiction. The DVD extra 'Stunts on Wheels' reveals how important it was for Tarantino not to use digital effects for the car chase but "real cars smashing into real cars, real dumb people driving them", to quote Mike. Tarantino's idea of film genre is directly linked to the actual *making* of films, production and film history; he explains he wanted to promote "a young female black stunt driver", Chrissy Weathersby, so the film would have a direct impact on the industry.

Furthermore, Zoe's passion for car movies takes into account neither gender nor genre; she calls these cult films "classics": "[*Vanishing Point*]'s just one of the *best* American movies ever made". The opposition between male and female film genres is metonymically represented by Zoe and Lee, the model dressed like a cheerleader who likes *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986). Kim is the link between the two: although admitting that her taste for car movies distinguishes

her from "most girls", she does not reject her femininity, explaining that she also watched "John Hughes movies". In other words, Kim, the tomboy, asserts that she is neither all-boy nor all-girl, but a hybrid.[2] Like a guy, she refuses to let other people sit on the trunk of her car, but she also refuses to lend her 'cute' belt to Zoe so she can play Ship's Mast. This scene, which Abernathy does not witness, deconstructs the latter's biased remark that "Kim doesn't give a shit about Italian *Vogue*", in which she denies Kim a typically feminine interest—Abernathy is also the one who warns Lee not to sit on Kim's car. So if Abernathy rejects Kim's gendered distinction about car movies, she herself upholds the difference between Kim and Zoe and other girls, telling the latter they have "some fuckin' balls" for trying to shut her out. The Ship's Mast scene, however, shows Abernathy discovering the stuntman in her. Indeed, when Kim makes Abernathy sit up front, a close-up zooms in on Abernathy whose face goes from concern over Zoe's safety to delight at her daredevil feat. I see this as the first step in Abernathy's rite of passage into Kim and Zoe's hybrid male-female world, the final step being when Abernathy delivers the *coup de grâce* to Mike. Abernathy's 'coming-out' thus deconstructs her own essentialist views on gender and genre.

Tarantino may have chosen not to make any of these characters lesbians in order to avoid 'tomboy' clichés, but the film certainly plays on the 'homosexual eroticism' which permeates the buddy movie (Mulvey 1975). Indeed, the girls' playing Ship's Mast suggests they can obtain pleasure without men[3]—Kim asks Zoe if she 'want[s] it fuckin' faster'—while Mike's interfering symbolises male rejection of lesbian transgression. The slasher and the car movie overlap as the killer pursues those who have broken the law—the girls have 'borrowed' the car. The focus, then, is on gender, rather than sexuality. This was already the case with Julia. If the latter has billboards on every block and is in this respect an aspiring double of *Allure* cover girl Lee, Pam reveals that Julia "was a monster" who "used to beat up and terrorize [boys] in third grade", confirming Shanna's earlier remark that Julia sometimes acts like a "mean girl in a high school movie". Jungle Julia's behavior is thus generically determined by phallocentric film genres, as her name suggests: she is the queen of the jungle, worshipped by men who have "had *plenty* of fun adorin" [her] ass" and whose "teeth marks" she proudly wears "on [her] butt". Julia has made her body into an instrument of power and asserts her autonomy vis-à-vis men, not wanting "to be a) dependent on their ass, or b) depending on their ass", but by promoting male fantasies, she also recognises and reinforces patriarchal hegemony.

## FRAMING: GAZING AT FEMALE INTIMACY

In this ideal horror film for guys, the all-girl cast, presented as secondary to the male lead, raises expectations concerning the number of victims. The credits open on a close-up of an anonymous girl's feet on the dashboard as the actresses' names roll by (fig. 2). *All* the girls are condensed in this fetishistic representation of a female body part cut off by the frame. The film will retrospectively relate the camera to the killer when the latter touches Abernathy's feet sticking out of the window like Julia in the first car scene. Clearly, the film is playing on Mulvey's analysis of the cinematic gaze as gendered masculine in classic Hollywood cinema, producing "visual pleasure" thanks to either "a sadistic-voyeuristic look, whereby the gazer salves his unpleasure at female lack by seeing the woman punished", or "a fetishistic-scopophilic look, whereby the gazer salves his unpleasure by fetichising the female body in whole or part" (Clover 1992: 8). Julia evokes the threatening male gaze in her lapdance scenario when she tells Arlene the guy should look her "dead in the eye". Mike and the camera eye merge when he takes pictures of the girls. The killer's, the camera's, and presumably the director's and the male spectator's desire is thus shown to be one and the same: a desire to consume a fetishised female body, either whole or in pieces. Just as the lapdance warms Mike up for murder, the spectator gets to enjoy some gratuitous scenes of the girls dancing. But the medium close-up of Julia dancing also shows Omar, who is juxtaposed to Mike in the very scene where his views on Julia are exposed, watching her in the bottom righthand corner (fig. 3). This shot displays, then, both the female object of the gaze and the male "bearer of the look" in the sort of dancing scene Mulvey discusses (1975); it is echoed in the second part of the film when Mike, the stalker, appears out of focus in the background as the girls talk in the diner. Another scene raises expectations concerning Arlene's lapdance by showing her dancing by herself, expectations which would be thwarted if it were not for Mike. The killer's function is, then, to fulfill the male spectator's desires by proxy, and the camera/director/spectator are explicitly represented as his accomplices when he grins and stares right at the camera before driving off to kill the girls (fig. 4).

The second shot in the film starts with a close-up of Julia's feet walking away from the camera, then tilts up over her body as, naked except for her underwear, she slips on a T-shirt. The subsequent close-up of the Jungle Julia doll with the real Julia in the background parodies the fetishisation of Julia's body, its grotesquely comical features defusing her sexyness while its shaking head seems to mock the spectator (fig. 5). Another close-up of her feet reveals a poster of *Soldier Blue* (Ralph Nelson, 1970) in the background, where a naked Indian girl tied up

in rope faces a charging cavalry with her back to the viewer (fig. 6). The poster reflects the fetishisation of Julia's body, which is also seen from behind, but the reference to *Soldier Blue*, where a female character supporting the Cheyenne against the American army utlimately leads a soldier to change his mind about the conflict, encourages a more politically subversive reading of the female character's power. For if the camera fetishises Julia, its position—on the floor—recalls the men who worship her body. That one of Julia's powerful legs ends up getting torn off in the accident literally enacts Mulvey's thesis that woman is punished and that visual pleasure is related to castration anxiety: Julia is symbolically castrated through the very body part the cinematic gaze fetishised.

The first female character to appear is presented in an intimate situation, playing, then, on the idea that the camera is a peeping tom. The first words spoken by a female character offer the banalised expression of an intimate need, when Arlene tells Julia she's "gotta take the world's greatest piss". Like Julia, Arlene's body is cut up into close-ups of her crotch and feet, while her face remains hidden from view as she rushes up the stairs. The complicity between camera and spectator is explicitly confirmed in the second part of the film when Lee says her "pervert" boyfriend Toolbox's fantasy is to "watch her pee".[4] The camera's catering to the male spectator's scopophilia is typical of the slasher (Humphries 2002: 142-4); Lee's boyfriend's name recalls *Toolbox Murders* (Dennis Donnelly, 1978). Tarantino is obviously playing on the argument made by feminist critics that the male spectator is fascinated by "the image of woman's cut and bleeding body" as a "symbolic form of castration" (Creed 1993: 125). Arlene's hiding her crotch with her hand emphasises the fact that she's cupping nothing, while, in the scene where Pam is murdered, the medium close-up of her upper body, followed by the close-up on her bloody face, enable/force the spectator to contemplate female abjection, like Mike who leans over to get a better look. Pam, here, literally represents woman as "the bearer of the bleeding wound" (Mulvey 1975).

But *Death Proof* also fulfills another male fantasy, that of seeing how girls act when guys are not around. Not only are some of the locations (apartment, cars) intimate, but the camera-work also creates filmic spaces of intimacy, e.g. the diner scene where the camera tracks round the girls. The camera also shows Julia alone sending text messages to Christian Simonson, either singling her out with a close-up or following her past a glass partition, the cinematic space being reinforced by one of the rare instances of non-diegetic music. Shortly after, the male gaze, metonymically represented by Omar, is once again shown violating her intimacy. If these scenes are parodic, they do make Julia more ambivalent by suggesting a more vulnerable, i.e. more 'feminine', side to the sexy tomboy. Another scene of intimacy that plays on

gender ambivalence is when Zoe and Kim talk about Ship's Mast. The full shot of them kneeling down emphasises the distance that separates the girls from the spectator who ignores what Kim means when she says she does not "wanna do it" (fig. 7). Only this time the spectator is excluded not from the 'feminine' quality of their conversation but from its 'masculine' quality. As such, the spectator unfamiliar with the daredevil game is made to identify with Abernathy, the 'chum' waiting in the car.

From the combination of slasher and buddy film elements discussed here we may infer that *Death Proof* is a buddy-horror-car film *with* girls *for* guys. I do not mean to say that women cannot watch it, only that these are the film's aesthetic terms. In so doing, Tarantino avoids the hitch of appropriating female experience and/or feminist discourse. But I would also argue that the film's subversion its own parodic terms *could* make *Death Proof* a film for girls. In the end, *Death Proof* could be [a buddy-horror-car film with girls for guys] for girls insomuch as it explicitily *asserts* its being a film for guys, notably by displaying the male gaze's subjection of the female body. It not only encourages what Clover calls "cross-gender identification" as slashers often do (1992: 43), and makes the girls' "tomboy pleasures" acceptable (Mulvey 1981), but at times possibly even excludes some male spectators from the "masculine" aspects of the film.

## VISUAL EFFECTS: TARANTINO'S GIRLS

An analysis of the visual effects conceived during the editing phase backs up this argument. First, they are meant to reproduce the conditions of watching a double feature in a cheap movie theater or drive-in by mimicking the projector reel skipping or bad quality film. Tarantino not only reveals that film genre includes production codes as well as aesthetic ones, but also that what Altman calls the pragmatic dimension of genre can affect the syntactic dimension (1999: 210). These effects, which draw attention to the film's visual and generic codes, are also related to the subversion of gender norms. Indeed, in the very first scene where the girls talk in the car, the first shot of Jungle Julia skips, while the high point of the film's fetishising process, Arlene's much-awaited lapdance, resorts to a similar effect, thus drawing attention to the film *as film*, as material, and breaking the 'illusion' characteristic of narrative cinema (Mulvey 1975).

Furthermore, it is significant that the only instances of C.G.I. are the slow motion replays which enable the spectator to enjoy each girl's death in detail; the visual effects' artificiality is highlighted as each girl is alone in the car when she dies. The film seems to argue that the effects contemporary mainstream cinema relishes are in service of the sadistic-voyeuristic look Mulvey attacked. The special effects, namely

the stunts, are opposed to the visual effects that the stunt characters mock. The use of cheap special effects when the girls slay the male killer is, then, a symbolic retaliation against the sophisticated visual effects the first accident subjected the first girls to.

That the play on special versus visual effects is linked to the female characters is confirmed in the end credits—as opposed to the opening credits which seemed to exemplify the camera's fetishising terms—where various images of the actresses goofing around appear, amongst mock-vintage photos of mannequins and anonymous girls, always associated with different colour palettes, in time to Serge Gainsbourg's 'Chick Habit', a song about girls' getting their revenge on guys. As Kuersten notes (2008), this song by "an old reprobate who made sure to be surrounded by young lovelies" enables Tarantino to mock his own ambiguous relationship to the female characters and cast. On the one hand, Julia is the director's double, being "to music what [Tarantino] is to movies",[5] but on the other, by portraying Warren, who makes the girls drink Chartreuse, "[t]he only liquor so good they named a colour after it", Tarantino playfully embodies the stereotype of the sadistic male filmmaker: "I love that philosophy: 'Warren says it, we do it'!" This relationship was, in fact, already hinted at in the opening credits when Tarantino apppeared as Director of Photography right after Arlene's line about "pissing". Not only do the end credits playfully underline the reification operated by the camera eye, so that real and imitation girls, stills and moving images, are interchangeable, but the actresses' gazing right at the camera—just like Mike—mocks the authority of the cinematic gaze. One shot in particular shows Vanessa Ferlito next to a colour board (fig. 8), while another shot shows Rose McGowan imitating Cousin Itt from *The Adams Family*, facing the camera as a character by turning her back on it as an actress (fig. 9). If the film has, in the end, compromised the "visual pleasure" of "narrative cinema", there remains the thrill of thwarting that very pleasure, notably by playfully subverting gendered generic codes.

## NOTES

1. Both definitions from Urban Dictionary.com.

2. Cars are also gendered hybrid, identified as both masculine ("muscle") and feminine ("bitch") by Zoe.

3. Zoe also offers to crack Kim's back and give her foot massages.

4. The film highlights patriarchal representations: a 'nice' girl like Lee says "pee", while Abernathy uses the word "piss" to act tough when the stuntgirls reject her.

5. In 'Reservoir Girls'.

## WORKS CITED

Altman, Rick 1999. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI.

Bernard, Jamie 1995. *Quentin Tarantino: The Man and His Movies*. New York: Harper.

Butler, Judith 1993. *Bodies That Matter*. New York and London: Routledge.

Clover, Carol. 1992. *Men, Women and Chain Saws*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP.

Creed, Barbara 1993. *The Monstrous-Feminine*. London: Routledge.

Freud, Sigmund 1965 (1923). *Totem et tabou*. Paris: Payot.

Grant, Barry K. ed. *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*. Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press

———— 1977. 'Introduction'. Barry K. Grant, ed. 1-3.

Humphries, Reynold 2002. *The American Horror Film*. Edinburgh Edinburgh UP.

Kuersten, Erich 2008. 'The Foxy, the Dead, and the Foxier: Re-Visiting *Death Proof*'. *Bright Lights Film Journal* 59 http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/59/59deathproof.html (accessed February, 6 2010)

McConnell, Frank D. 1977. 'Leopards and History: The Problem of Film Genre'. Barry Keith Grant, ed., 7-15.

Mulvey, Laura 1975. 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema'. *Screen* 16: 6-18.

———— 1981. 'Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema''. *Framework* 15-17: 12-15.

Sobchack, Thomas 1977. 'Genre Film: A Classical Experience'. Barry Keith Grant, ed., 39-52.

Tarantino, Quentin 2007. *Quentin Tarantino's* Death Proof. New York: Weinstein Books.